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`The one who rides the donkey does not know the ground is hot'

Tony Dogbe

• Introduction

During a discussion with a focus group on their perception of poverty, a man in Komaka, a village in the Upper-East Region of Ghana, said, *'the one who rides the donkey does not know the ground is hot'*. He meant that the rich man cannot know or feel the poor man's problems unless he gets off the donkey and walks on the ground or unless he asks the poor man.

I have chosen this proverb as the title for this paper because it captures the essence of the Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) exercises that my organisation, the Centre for the Development of People (CEDEP) played a major role in organising during 1993-4. One of the reasons for our PPAs was to 'hand over the stick' to the poor to lead the discussion on poverty and the strategies which should be adopted to mitigate it. On a subject such as poverty, it is the poor who can best give us insight into what it means and how it can be tackled. PRA methods were used during the PPA exercises to elicit these insights, but have also been adopted subsequently to get the policymakers and others removed from the ground to listen to the voices of the poor.

• PPA studies in Ghana

The Ghana PPA series was initiated by the World Bank as part of a series of research initiatives under the *Extended Poverty Study.* The assessment was conducted in three phases, each lasting two to three months, spread over a period of more than two years, from May 1993 to November 1994. Phases 1 and 2 gained insights into the living experiences of the poor, focusing on perceptions of wealth, poverty and well-being and understanding the needs and priorities which must be considered in the formulation of policies and programmes directed at reducing poverty. Phase 3 explored access to and utilisation of basic social services by the poor.

• South-South skills share and networking

At the time of the PPA, we were not aware of anyone in-country who utilised PRA methods widely. Thus, two experienced trainers from India were brought in to do the training. This was in itself significant. Coming from another 'developing country', with conditions similar to those in Ghana, it was easy for the trainers to convey their experiences, conviction and enthusiasm to us, the trainees.

Furthermore, the training materials such as slides, videos and handouts were based on Indian experiences. We saw many parallels with our own circumstances which convinced us that these methods were applicable in Ghana. I doubt if two trainers from the North could have had the same impact and suggest that such South-South skills transfer should be encouraged.

It is also worth noting that the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) in Sussex, England facilitated this skills transfer. They did not send their own staff when contacted for trainers, but recommended the two Indian trainers. I would like to see many more Northern institutions, especially the bi-lateral agencies, shift towards this approach. As a citizen of a poor country, it gives me pride and dignity to see someone from a similar background share their experiences and knowledge with us.

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• The RRA-PRA spectrum

Since CEDEP was introduced to PRA methods, we have used them in a number of policy-oriented studies with communities, to identify and plan the implementation of project activities. My observations suggest that when used for research, the approach is often more RRA than PRA. This is because: the research teams come for a short period of time, tend not to live in the community, raise expectations (which are not fulfilled) and, in most of the studies, have not given feedback to the community. This makes the process extractive.

However, when participatory learning activities are used for project activities, the participation of the community is increased. The process is less extractive because raised expectations are met with project activities and follow-up.

Because of the differences in the approaches, process and outcomes of research and project activities, I suggest that participatory learning is a spectrum, with RRA at one end and PRA at the other. We need to be honest where our work falls in that spectrum. This enables us to accept the limitations of what we can or cannot do with the community with which we are working.

• Face-to-face interaction

An important aspect of PRA is its capacity to influence the attitude of the educated and urban elite towards the poor, illiterate and rural people. During PRA training, trainees are often sceptical as to the capacity of the poor to carry out intelligent assessments. Yet after a few hours in the community, their doubt often changes to respect and admiration. For example, after a PRA exercise with Ministry of Health officials, a district officer, who had been opposed to the PRA team, conceded that it is not a community that is 'difficult'. He recognised that the problem often lies with official attitudes towards communities and their influence on district teams' strategies. From this experience, the participating officials requested that training be repeated in other districts, so that more officials could learn to listen and learn from the villagers that they once looked down upon.

• Presenting PRA-style studies

While presenting the PPA findings, I realised that direct quotations from the poor had the greatest impact. These 'voices of the poor' awakened the officials and staff whose lives are often far removed from these conditions. Many were surprised at the insight and depth of analysis of the people they had been speaking for. Clearly, they had under valued and under estimated the ability of the poor to speak for themselves.

In one workshop, the staff who worked in the communities agreed with almost everything the people had said, including criticisms of their performance. It is important, therefore, that reports of PRA-style studies should endeavour to capture not just the letter, but also the spirit of what people are saying.

• Policy influence

It is too early for us to evaluate whether our PPA, and other PRA-related studies, have had any direct and appreciable influence on the policies of government, non-government, bilateral and multilateral organisations. As one of a number of poverty studies in Ghana, it would be difficult to attribute any policy changes specifically to the PPAs.

However, the PPA process contributed to the World Bank's Extended Poverty Study in several ways. It provided an extensive representation of alternative views of poverty, including discussions of vulnerability and seasonal dimensions of poverty. It represented the views of poor communities and their priorities for poverty reduction and strategies for moving out of poverty. Finally, it contributed extensive material on local access to, and the quality and relevance of, social services from the perspective of PPA participants.

In addition, the PPA contributed to the following policy priorities within the World Bank. First, and deriving from priority ranking exercises, an emphasis was placed on the need for a long-term focus on rural infrastructure, including improved water supply and rural roads. This resulted in the World Bank developing a Rural Infrastructure Project, which

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will attempt to deliver resources to the community for this kind of initiative.

Secondly, the PPA's thorough and extensive analysis of priority issues in education for poor rural and urban communities revealed an urgent need to improve the quality of basic education. The World Bank country department is developing a major initiative, with other donors, to provide free basic education.

Thirdly, the PPA emphasised the barriers experienced by the poor in accessing public health services. This contributed to the instigation of a multi-donor initiative to support a Sector Investment Programme in health.

Fourthly, the PPA contributed to greater awareness of the need to develop mechanisms for improved targeting of poverty-focused interventions, with measures proposed for a possible 'social fund' type of programme. Finally, in relation to poverty monitoring, the World Bank study acknowledges the need for pluralist approaches, including qualitative, participatory analysis as a well as questionnaire-based methods.

At the national level, CEDEP has not evolved a mechanism for evaluating the use of the PPA studies. This is an area we hope to turn our attention to in the future. There are, however, recent Government initiatives that reflect areas of emphasis in the PPA output. The Ministry of Education, for example, has now directed that all communities should form School Management Committees (SMCs), with grants available to match funds raised by communities to implement their plans. CEDEP has been asked to assist SMCs in drawing up plans for improving he quality of schooling in sixty pilot communities.

An area of frustration for many planning officials of government, bilateral, multilateral and non-governmental organisations is the lack of information on the state of affairs on the ground. For example, the last population census in Ghana was in 1983. Thus, as a result of the PPAs, PRA has been acknowledged as a worthwhile approach for collecting timely information relatively quickly. This enables planners to get an overview of the situation on the ground and take some interim decisions or actions. This is evident from the kind of studies we have been called to undertake. As I write, CEDEP has been asked to assist the Department of Social welfare to come up with Poverty Profiles of five districts in the Ashanti Region under a project being funded by Save the Children Fund, UK.

A strength of PRA studies is that there is little scope for officials to dispute findings which are people's opinions. If ordinary people have the 'wrong' impression or perception, then, it may be that the agency involved is not explaining itself well enough or not supplying the necessary information. It could also be that a policy or programme is not having the intended impact.

• Conclusions

Compared to countries in Asia, PRA is relatively new in Ghana. My organisation, CEDEP, was introduced to it only three years ago but it has become an integral part of our way of gathering information and working with communities. We have an increasing number of requests from various organisations for us to undertake PRA studies and training. It is evident that PRA is gaining popularity as a tool for eliciting the views of the grassroots and channelling that information into programmes for policy formulation.

For PRA to continue to meet the needs of the grassroots, policymakers and programme designers in a country, practitioners must seek to truly represent what the people are saying. With time and as we gain more experience, we should be moving towards a situation where ordinary people can present their own findings. Remember: 'The one who rides the donkey does not know the ground is hot'. Making the voices of the poor heard is one of the major strengths of PRA and it should not be lost. To minimise this danger, there is a need for PRA practitioners to network and share their ideas and experiences.

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